

Runaways by mathgoat

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - High School, Bisexual Richie Tozier, Eventual Smut, Gay Eddie Kaspbrak, M/M, Mutual Pining, Oblivious Eddie Kaspbrak, Oblivious Richie Tozier, Richie Tozier & Stanley Uris Are Best Friends, Slow Burn, au where no one leaves and no one forgets because fuck that shit, lil angst here and there but this is a roMANCE GUYS, no beta we die like men, sort of. theres flirting n pining n shit, stan is the best best friend ever, stupid dumb boys being oblivious, they stupid

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, smattering of ocs

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

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Summary:

As soon as they graduate high school, Richie and Eddie run away from home. Part 1 is the plan, part 2 is the action.

(Or: Watch two doofus boys fall in love over the course of several years, from their junior year of high school in 1992 until their sophomore year of college in 1996. Canon divergent – Pennywise DID happen and is mentioned a few times, but It is dead in the ground where it belongs.)

1. You heard me, Eds.

Author's Note:

HELLO and welcome to this monster of a fic. I haven't published a fic for a good five years but I've been writing and rping a ton since then so hopefully I'm not too out of practice !! This is sort of a slow burn – they don't get together until waaaay way into the fic but there's pining and flirting and all that good shit interspersed throughout o f c o u r s e. ENJOY :))))

This fic is switching POV. I've planned the entire thing out with great detail and have a few chapters prepared already in case I get slow with writing or updating, and most chapters are half from Richie's pov and half from Eddie's. Pls remind me and push me to keep going cause I get distracted and bored so easily even though I want to do this! Your comments would mean the world to me <3

((working title atm. haven't figured out a proper title yet but wanted to post this anyway so here u go))

Summary for the Chapter:

June 1992: Richie springs an idea on Eddie.

PART 1

“Let's get out of here.”

Eddie looked over the top of the Superman comic he was reading, eyes squinting almost suspiciously at Richie across the hammock from him; Richie, whose own eyes were still glued to the magazine in his hands, so much so that Eddie wondered if he had actually spoken or if Eddie was finally losing his mind. His eyes flickered across the

magazine cover for a few moments, willing it to move so he could make eye contact with the person behind it. Richie said nothing. So Eddie said nothing and went back to reading his comic.

It was a regular old Tuesday, about a few weeks into summer after their sophomore year of high school and a few weeks after Eddie's seventeenth birthday. The Losers had gathered, as they always did, down in the clubhouse in the early afternoon to read and chat and listen to music and play stupid games like truth or dare and FMK, until one by one, people had to go home. Mike and Stan had already headed off; Mike had work to do on the farm before dinner and Stan had said something about his parents complaining he was never around. Beverly was currently getting ready to leave, and wherever Bev went, so did Ben, so Bill was packing up whatever shit the others had been doing while Richie and Eddie fought, as they always did, over who had spent how long in the hammock.

Fifteen minutes ago, Eddie had been sitting on the arm of the tattered two-seater couch Ben had brought, half listening to Bill and Bev discuss how Aerosmith's new album compared to the previous one, and half reading the same double-spread of his comic for the third time at that point. He had glanced over to where Richie was sprawled in the hammock, feet dangling off the edge because he *never stopped growing*. Eddie had checked his watch, seen that it had been nearly twenty minutes since Richie's turn – how unusual it was for Eddie to forget the time – and promptly walked across the clubhouse to inform him that he needed to move his bony ass. After the spectacle they always had, the song and dance of yelling and poking and squirming, they had been settled in the hammock, legs all over each other, and were reading for all of six minutes when Bev announced she was leaving. It was getting close to the time when Eddie should probably leave, too, because his mother basically threw a tantrum when he came home after sunset, even though he was seventeen fucking years old and able to look after himself. Beverly came over and ruffled Richie's hair in lieu of a goodbye as she hiked her backpack over her shoulder.

"See ya later, alligators," she said to Eddie with a wink. Eddie grinned, opened his mouth to reply, but Richie cut him off.

"After a while, crocodile!" he called back, wiggling his eyebrows at

Eddie.

Eddie's jaw dropped slightly, glaring at him. "Fuck you, Richard, you know that's my thing."

"Aw, Eds Spagheds, you know it gets me all hot and bothered when you use my real name. What, are you jealous of what you heard last night when me and your mom—"

"Beep beep, dickhead."

Rolling his eyes, Eddie turned to Ben and Bev, waving them out with a goodbye, then turned back to Richie. He was already engrossed in his magazine again, so Eddie picked up his comic and looked down at the page for the fourth time, still not really paying attention to what he was reading. God, he was so distracted; is this what it felt like inside Richie's head? Eddie might have thrown himself in front of the school bus if he had to deal with this shit every day.

Bill watched Ben and Bev climb up the ladder and disappear out of sight, still staring after them for a few seconds even after the hatch closed, before returning to packing up the cassette tapes that were scattered on the floor. Somehow, it was usually Stan and/or Bill who stayed the latest with Richie and Eddie, as if they were reliving their days as young teens when the Losers' Club had consisted of only the four of them, playing pranks on each other and spending time in the arcade for hours on end. Not that Eddie didn't love having Beverly, Ben and Mike around, but sometimes nostalgia clouded his mind and he *missed* being a kid.

Well, he didn't miss everything about it.

Of course, *that* summer was constantly at the back of everyone's minds, suppressed memories occasionally making their way to the surface in the form of nightmares; no one wanted to talk about it or even think about it, and they had carried on with their teenage lives as best as they could after suffering such trauma. What mattered, though, was that no one else was ever going to have to deal with that monster ever again – the Losers had made sure of it. After so many years, they'd started to forget or block it out or something, and after Eddie's arm had healed, the only real reminder of that summer's

events even happening were the scars on their hands. Eddie had caught Stan staring at his palm for several minutes before, sometimes his lip trembling, sometimes his jaw clenched, but then, as if someone snapped their fingers in front of his face, he'd jolt out of it and continue with whatever was going on around him. It didn't surprise Eddie that Stan was the one still heavily affected by those memories.

After that summer, instead of pushing each other away and getting lost in their own heads, their group had grown tighter, closer, spending more time together than ever. The seven of them were always strewn across the clubhouse floor or the Denbrough living room, splashing around at the quarry or huddled up around Bev's aunt's fireplace or taking up half of the back row at the Aladdin in an R-rated movie they'd snuck in to see. More recently, they'd begun to split off into smaller groups, and part of Eddie worried that they'd eventually drift apart, but today, being in the clubhouse that Ben built, surrounded by all his friends, Eddie had never been more sure that they'd all be friends for the rest of their lives. He couldn't imagine a world without Bill's leadership, Bev's strength, Mike's kind heart, Ben's wisdom, Stan's sarcasm, Richie's humour. As horrible as the summer of eighty-nine was, it was what brought them all together, and Eddie wouldn't trade it for anything, even taking the broken arm and his mother's wrath all over again if it meant he got to keep these amazing people by his side.

Once his nightmares subsided, the main thing that continued to suffer in Eddie's life, upon learning that his medication was all bullshit, was his relationship with his mother. She had tried to tighten the leash, tried to ground him more often over nothing, tried to convince him that not all of his medicine was fake. Eddie had tried so hard not to listen, but she was his *mom* and she loved him, or so she said. He supposed she did, in her own twisted way, and as long as he lived with her, he had to deal with it. He had somehow since fallen back into listening to the shit Sonia Kaspbrak spouted, but less often, and with more scepticism and less subservient, blind faith. He learned what defiance meant, which ultimately lead to him spending more time with the people who actually cared about him, despite what she continued to tell him about 'dirty boys and girls like *that*'. Honestly, Eddie was surprised he hadn't cracked it again and run away from

home. Not that'd he'd have anywhere to really go. Maybe Bill or Stan's family would be okay with him staying for a few nights.

So, when Richie mumbled something about leaving, Eddie kind of assumed he was talking about heading off home, as well, since it was nearly 5pm and Richie also knew Eddie's mother would complain if he was out too much longer. That was why it was so strange that he didn't say anything else or respond to Eddie's looks of confusion. Bill was still on the other side of the clubhouse, now organising their music collection in what appeared to be alphabetical order. The corner of Eddie's lips curved upwards in amusement; it seemed like such a Stan thing to do. He turned back to Richie.

"What the fuck are you on about?" Eddie asked, actually putting *The Death of Superman* down this time.

Richie still didn't move, so Eddie poked him with his foot, only reaching his shoulder now because *fuck*, the boy was so tall. In the last few years, they'd all shot up, Richie and Mike especially, and their shoulders started filling out. Despite being the oldest in their group – because even at four years old his mom wouldn't let him go to kindergarten and held him back another year – Eddie was only slightly taller than Bev and not quite as tall as Bill. But Richie was fucking tall – he and Mike were both nearing six feet. Now, Eddie could no longer smack his friend in the face with his socked foot because Richie's scrawny legs had to fit *somewhere* in the hammock and to avoid them both getting kicked in the crotch when Eddie inevitably squirmed his way in, it meant sitting slightly further apart. Eddie tapped his foot against Richie's shoulder a second time, provoking the taller boy to finally peer over the top of his magazine.

"You heard me, Eds," was all he said.

Eddie rolled his eyes. He honestly had no clue what went through Richie's head before he opened his mouth. Nothing, he suspected.

"Alright, let's pretend I didn't, then. And don't fucking call me that."

Bill cleared his throat, apparently done with the cassettes and now standing facing the hammock, hands in his pockets.

“I might head home, t-t-too,” he said, eyes darting between Eddie and Richie, as if trying to imply something.

Usually, Richie and Eddie were the last to leave the clubhouse; Richie because his parents couldn't have cared less where their son was or what time he came home, and Eddie because he wasn't about to leave Richie here alone, in the damp and dusty clubhouse all by himself as the sun went down, casting eerie shadows across the trees outside when they inevitably exited, stomachs growling like they hadn't just downed several bags of potato chips and multiple cans of soda each. And also because he just wanted to spend time with his best friend, even if it meant an extra long scolding when he returned home.

And when the two of them weren't the last to leave, they usually left together anyway, like they were a package deal. As soon as Eddie decided he'd had enough of the filth around him, or he wasn't feeling up to another screaming match with his mother, Richie was right there beside him, offering to ride home with him, making some dumbass joke about seeing Eddie's mother when he dropped him home. Eddie always rolled his eyes and told Richie to shut the fuck up about his mom already.

“See you later, Billy Boy,” Richie said, saluting. “Oh, shit, we were gonna go to the Aladdin tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, the third Alien f-film.” Bill locked eyes with Eddie, who didn't remember them talking about a movie.

Richie beamed. “Sweet! Did you tell Stan The Man?”

Bill nodded, pointedly looking at Eddie again and almost glaring at Richie.

“Oh yeah, did you wanna come, Eddie?” Richie finally got the hint. What a prick. “I figured your delicate soul couldn't handle another horror movie after you screamed at Aliens so I didn't ask you, but don't worry, I'll hold your hand and protect you when the chest bursters do their chest bursting.”

Eddie slapped Richie's outstretched hand away, folding his arms across his chest. “Fuck you, asshole. Yes, I'll come, I'll talk to my

mom about it in the morning.”

After the hatch closed behind Bill, Richie finally put down his damn magazine.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said again, actually looking at Eddie this time.

“Yeah, I heard you the first time, dipshit,” Eddie fired back, snatching the magazine from Richie and throwing it on the floor beside them. He squirmed, trying to sit up properly. “Do you wanna go home?”

Richie stared at him for a moment, and then shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was softer than before and gentler than Eddie was used to, and Eddie was immediately more attentive. This Richie, soft Richie, seemed to be reserved for him – it was as if he had been waiting for Bill to finally leave before repeating himself because whatever he had to say was too serious to be heard coming out of his fucking potty mouth by anyone who wasn’t Eddie. Eddie still didn’t know what made him so damn special.

“Nah, never do, Eds,” Richie replied, bringing his hand down on Eddie’s ankle with a light slap. “No, I mean, we... Don’t you sometimes think about, you know, fucking off outta here?”

Eddie raised an eyebrow. “I’m not... You mean out of Derry? Yeah, all the time.” He scoffed, foot twitching under Richie’s hand. “Every time my mom tries to guilt me into taking those goddamn pills again, I wanna get out of here. Every time I think about Bowers getting out of jail and coming to kick my ass, I want to leave this freaking town.” Eddie shrugged, unsure what Richie was getting at, exactly.

Richie cocked his head slightly, teeth coming to rest gently against his front lip. His eyes dropped from Eddie’s gaze, brought his hands together to fidget on his lap, and Eddie watched him curiously, eyebrows furrowed slightly. Quiet Richie was usually a tell-tale sign that something was up, but since no one else was around, Eddie didn’t have the heart to push his buttons or crack a joke about it, so he waited, giving his best friend all the time he needed.

After a few moments, Richie sighed. “Yeah,” was all he said.

Okay, now Eddie was getting concerned. Taking-his-time-to-speak Richie was one thing, but obviously-bottling-it-up Richie was someone Eddie had only seen a handful of times in all the years they'd known each other. Most recently, a few months ago, once their nightly ritual of Richie sneaking into Eddie's bedroom had slowed down to around once a week, Richie had tumbled through the window at midnight, as he always did. But then he walked over to the bed where Eddie was lying and dramatically threw himself on top of him, clutching at his back and sobbing quietly into the crook of his neck, body trembling in a way that caused Eddie's stomach to jump into his throat and squeeze back instinctively, holding and rubbing and soothing his friend for reasons he didn't fully understand. Eddie knew Richie's parents were grade A assholes most of the time, but he'd never seen Richie react like this to any of their comments or fights before. Richie cried himself to sleep that night, which had never happened around Eddie before – Eddie didn't think Richie had even cried in front of the other Losers at all – and neither of them said anything about it in the morning when he left. Eddie didn't push then, and he wasn't about to push now.

He swallowed, apparently audibly enough for Richie's eyes to flicker back up to his, and then Richie shrugged, glancing between his fidgeting fingers and Eddie's eyes, like he couldn't make up his mind about continuing the conversation. Eddie's heart rate picked up slightly, starting to get a little nervous. Maybe he should push, he considered, selfishly, even if it was just to stop himself worrying.

"Why do you ask, Rich?" He paused for a moment. "I... You know, we fuck around a lot but I'm always gonna listen if you have something important to say."

"I dunno, I just think about it sometimes." He was speaking quietly. Everything about this situation was throwing Eddie for a loop. He dropped his comic book on top of the magazine on the floor and sat up, reaching over and placing a hand on top of Richie's, threading his own fingers between the fidgeting ones. It was something they'd been doing a lot recently, touching and holding just that bit longer than before, looking at each other with only the intention to look, smiling when the other caught them looking. Eddie had started to feel like his heart was in a perpetual state of *too tight* and *so nervous* when it

was just *Richie*, for goodness' sake, and he had no idea why his stupid chest reacted in such a way. Right now, though, Richie seemed like he needed prompting.

"Okay, so think out loud to me then," Eddie suggested.

"I just, I know how much you want to get away from your mom, and as much as I'd miss her sweet lovin', I'm not the biggest fan of my parents either and I just thought, cause we're like best friends and all and the others don't seem to hate this place so much anymore since Bev's aunt moved here for her and we're all on good terms now after her and Bill's break up and, fuck, Eds, I don't know what I'm saying? I just wanna get the hell out of here as soon as I can and I think... I mean, I *know* I'd miss you if you didn't come with me so maybe you could come with me, like we can go together?" It didn't sound like a question until the last word, but Eddie was having trouble processing it all because, as if a dam had broken in Richie's brain, his fucking blabber mouth back at it with run-on sentences that Eddie now had to decipher quickly so his friend didn't retreat into whatever shell he'd just come out of a moment ago.

"I'm gonna ignore your crack at my mom and the fact that you can't be serious for one goddamn second," he began, unable to help the corner of his mouth twitching into a smirk. "You are being serious, right? Like, you've really thought about running away? *With me?*" Eddie still couldn't wrap his head around it as the words came out of his own mouth.

"Well, yeah, Eds. Who else would I run away with? Fucking Stanley? That boy would sew my mouth shut in the first hour being stuck in a car with me." Richie's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, shit. I'm gonna have to get a car. I'm gonna have to get a job to get a car. Man, I haven't thought this through, have I? I just got so excited about getting out of this town with my little Spaghetti Man and all reasonable thoughts flew outta my head."

Eddie pursed his lips, wracking his brain to recall his trip to the pharmacy yesterday. "I think Domino's Pizza is hiring," he said, almost shocking himself for considering this whole ordeal. "I saw some sign up on the window."

Richie's eyes sparkled. "Ooh, free pizza, here I come! I could save my entire pay check and just snack constantly on toppings and shit and never have to buy food again. If I work every weekend and some school nights, I could save enough for a piece of shit car in a few months, right? I could get Mike to help me fix it up and then keep working until we graduate and then I'll have enough for a few months' rent and the insurance thing at an apartment and we can fucking ride off into the sunset together, Eds."

Eddie blinked, eyes softening with each word out of Richie's mouth. His chest felt heavy, like it was full, about it burst open with the adoration he felt for his best friend. "It's called a bond, Richie," he supplied.

"A bond!" Richie's hands flew out either side. "We'd have a bond and a place together and if we wait until we graduate, you can go to a real fucking college, not Maine Community bullshit that your mom always yaps on about. We could blast Whitney Houston from the stereo with no one to tell us to shut the fuck up! Eddie! We could be free."

Their hands found each other, Richie squeezing tightly. They were both grinning so widely that Eddie's cheeks started to hurt. It was crazy. It was really fucking crazy. But it was also the best thing Eddie had heard in a long, long time. *Free*. He could be himself, out of his mother's grasp, no one breathing down his throat every two seconds to not do this and not say that. He could go to a good college and even if he didn't get in to a school he wanted, a community college in another state was definitely a step up from the shithole they were currently in. If Richie and he got into the same school, they could even live on campus and not have to worry about finding a place. Shit, it all sounded too good to be true. He wasn't sure if they would be able to pull it off, but fuck, if they didn't try, Eddie was sure he would regret it for the rest of his life. There was no way in hell he was ever staying in Derry after he graduated, but if his mom knew what college he was going to, she'd be calling him every day and demanding he come home for every holiday and would constantly be trying to guilt trip him into coming back home. He'd rather die than live with her.

But Richie. *Richie*. Eddie would go to the ends of the Earth for his

best friend. At sixteen and seventeen years old, having known each other for over a decade, having been basically joined at the hip for the last few years, their lives were already so intertwined and Eddie could not imagine the rest of his life continuing without Richie Tozier scribbling dicks on his school books and screaming Metallica lyrics at the top of his lungs and calling him in the middle of the night to tell him he'd broken his thirty-second pair of glasses. Yeah, he was planning on leaving Derry for college anyway, but if he got to do that *with Richie*, his best friend and perhaps favourite person in the whole world? Fuck yes, he was so in.

They had two years. Eddie would be eighteen before senior year even started and Richie's birthday was in March, so they'd stay a few extra months until graduation, and then they'd fuck off out of here. Eddie breathed in shakily, squeezed Richie's hand back.

"Okay, yeah. Let's do it, Rich."

2. Totally old and non-existent crush.

Summary for the Chapter:

June 1992. Eddie gets introspective and the plan begins.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much to everyone who commented on the first chapter! I was smiling at my phone like an idiot every time I got a notification of a new comment. You guys all made my day <333. This chapter is a bit of a filler/background info stuff. Lotta internal monologue from both boys, to kind of give you an idea of where they stand with each other and such. Enjoy!!

It turned out to be a whole lot harder than Richie and Eddie thought. Of course, they didn't expect Richie getting a job and a car and Eddie scheming to ditch his mother and running away from their home town and their friends and their life to be *easy*. But it was really fucking hard. And they weren't prepared at all.

Richie did get the job at the pizza place without too much hassle, but was earning less than five dollars an hour, which to Eddie seemed ridiculous, because there was no way anyone would be able to live off that kind of wage. To try to compensate for that, Richie was picking up extra shifts every single week, which then meant Eddie and the rest of their friends weren't seeing him around as much. Eddie wasn't sure if it affected the other Losers as much as it seemed to affect him. He wasn't even entirely sure *why* he seemed so bothered by it all of a sudden. They'd gone an entire week without seeing each other before when Eddie's mother took him to Bangor to see his aunt the other year. Although, now that he thought about it, Richie had been waiting outside the Kaspbrak residence the day Eddie got back and had come barreling into him, knocking him over with the force of his hug, gushing about how *cute, cute, cute* Eddie was and how much he'd missed squeezing his cheeks. Eddie smiled fondly at the memory, ignoring the blush that crept up his cheeks now.

Apart from Bill, who basically adopted him when they met in in first grade, Richie had always been Eddie's best friend. After getting over his irrational fear of contracting a disease from the incessant dirt underneath Richie's fingernails, and after he learned that rolling with the boy's jokes and spitting fire right back at him was much easier than getting him to shut up – and a lot more enjoyable, too – seven year old Eddie hadn't minded his company that much. Eleven year old Eddie, who finally learned what Richie was actually talking about when he referred to 'fucking' all the time, had squealed at the thought of two people being so close to each other; why, they could swap all sorts of nasty infections. It was then that eleven year old Eddie decided he was never going to be fucking anybody. Ever.

Fifteen year old Eddie had slightly different ideas.

While Bill and Ben had been making googly-eyes at Beverly for all of that last summer, Eddie honestly couldn't see the appeal of romance and sex. He'd even caught Richie staring at her a few times, so he tried, he really did. He looked at her hair, because no one could doubt it was a beautiful part of her, so soft and vibrant. He looked at her face, her skin, noticed she had freckles like him, noticed her kind eyes that would snap into an icy glare in an instant if anyone so much as insulted her friends. He even brought himself to look lower, at the rest of her body. She was all smooth and curves and Eddie glanced at her chest once, when they were splashing around in the quarry one morning, but he really, *really* didn't see the appeal. Sure, Bev was gorgeous, and he enjoyed spending time with her. She was quick witted, intelligent in ways that didn't matter in school, and was always nice to every single one of them, had been the one encouraging them to listen to Ben and help Mike. Beverly was a great friend. But that was all.

Whatever, Eddie had supposed he'd get there eventually, with the whole girl thing.

But then he started to realise why he wasn't getting the whole girl thing. Because it was a *girl* thing.

One night two years ago, no night out of the ordinary, Richie had been throwing pebbles at Eddie's bedroom window until he opened up and let him in. He had tumbled into the room, glasses falling off

his face, and they had both knelt down to pick them up immediately. Richie's hand landed on top of Eddie's, like they were straight out of a fucking rom-com, and Eddie shrieked at the contact, yanking his hand back as if he'd been burned by the touch.

"Jesus, Eds," Richie had sniggered, "If I'd known you'd scream for me just by touching your hand, I'd have started doing it a long time ago."

Eddie's face flushed harder at this memory.

While Beverly's appearance was pleasant to Eddie's eyes, *Richie's* was stunning. The boy still hadn't quite grown into himself yet, all gangly limbs and knobby joints, long fingers and huge fucking feet, and wild, unruly hair that Eddie had tried, on multiple occasions, to get a comb through. But it was Richie, so it was endearing, so Eddie loved it. But it was so fucking confusing sometimes.

Like when his front teeth settled on his bottom lip during a rare moment when his mouth was shut, or how he adjusted his glasses every time he was nervous or sometimes angry, or how he had been letting his hair grow out in the past few years, trimming it in the summer after complaining about his neck being sweaty, but inevitably letting it grow out again over the next few months, all curly and untamed and so very Richie. Eddie wanted to run his hands through it, and he did, sometimes, during movie nights and sleepovers at Bill's, with Richie's head in Eddie's lap, fingers carding through those messy curls because Richie had clearly never heard of a hairbrush in his life. That hair, when Richie had been biking around in the summer, sweat gleaming on his forehead, or after swimming in the quarry, when he would drop down next to Eddie and shake his head like a fucking dog, and yet all Eddie wanted to do was tangle his fingers in those damp, black locks and yank Richie's head back and attach his teeth to his throat and *wow*, okay, maybe he did see the appeal of fucking after all.

Sure, Richie had inadvertently helped Eddie realise that he didn't see girls the same way everyone else seemed to, but that didn't mean he had to fucking pine for him when he was at work for four days in a row. He didn't even like Richie like that. He honestly didn't. He just thought he was pretty, that was all. Perfectly normal thing to think about one's best friend who was also a boy. Besides, Eddie thought

most of his friends were rather pretty. Bill had broad shoulders and pink lips and Stan had gorgeous hair and it was totally not weird at all to be thinking about his friends like this. He didn't dwell on it often, but he knew the reason he saw Richie differently to the rest of their friends was simply because they were so close. They were basically inseparable. He loved Richie, but not like *that*. They were just best friends. Best friends who wanted to spend every waking moment together, be it play fighting in the hammock at the clubhouse or video game fighting in the arcade or stealing each other's popcorn at the movies or whatever the fuck they felt like doing when Richie showed up at his house on any given day. Just because Eddie liked boys, didn't mean he liked any of his friends.

It had taken him a hell of a long time to come to terms with it. Most of his life, in fact. And, if he were being completely honest with himself, he still hadn't fully accepted it and didn't know if he would ever be able to talk about it to anyone else or even say the words out loud to himself. Obviously, he never saw girls in that way, he knew that much once they got to middle school, but for a while he was absolutely sure it was just because he was a late bloomer. He was shorter and smaller than the rest of the guys despite being older, he thought maybe he just needed an extra few years to work the girl thing out with himself. It certainly didn't help that Sonia was always going on about the kinds of dirty men who were with other men whenever someone on television talked about Elton John or Stephen Fry, making Eddie recoil back into his shell over and over again, making him feel more dirty and more sick than any physical illness she'd ever convinced him he'd had.

Even as a child himself, Eddie had thought boys who kissed boys were sick, because that's what his mother had told him and she was always right and she loved him and she knew what was best for him. The first time Eddie thought about kissing another boy, he had felt like his insides were being curled and squeezed and he ended up vomiting in the school bathroom after running out of class. The first time he thought about tugging Richie's hair and biting his throat at the quarry, Eddie had quickly made up an excuse to leave immediately because his heart was beating faster than usual and that meant he was having an asthma attack and his stomach was churning like he was going to throw up again but also like he was going to

melt into the ground if he wasn't careful.

Eddie didn't understand it at all. Eddie took *years* to understand it.

To this day, he still hadn't said the word 'gay' out loud, not even to himself. The first time he'd thought it, while staring in the mirror, brushing his teeth for the third time that day, he had gagged on his toothbrush and his eyes started watering, and he wasn't sure if it was because he choked or because of his thoughts that he was crying.

Even now, when he knew he liked boys and he didn't like girls and he wanted to kiss boys and maybe one day even fuck boys, Eddie sometimes felt the clenching of his stomach or the air getting caught in his throat when he thought about it, because he had been conditioned for so many years to associate being gay with being sick. It was like his inhaler, which he knew he didn't need, but sometimes still reached for in times of stress because that's what he'd always done. Eddie had always been told that people who were gay needed to be fixed, and sometimes he used to wonder if there were any truth in that statement, wondered if maybe his mom was right. Maybe he was still sick. Maybe he didn't have asthma but he did need to be fixed mentally and emotionally instead. Eddie had cried himself to sleep so many nights in the past, thinking about what Sonia would do if she found out that he'd thought about kissing Bill or Richie, if she'd kick him out or send him away for conversion therapy or just slap him.

After all those years, after crying over himself and his thoughts so many times, after fighting with his feelings for his friend, Eddie had finally, *finally* figured out that no, he wasn't sick or broken, and Sonia Kaspbrak could just go fuck herself.

Today, Eddie had to go to the pharmacy to pick up his mother's medication, which meant he would be walking past Domino's. Richie would probably be busy serving customers and not paying any attention to random people walking past the shop window and inconspicuously staring in. Eddie was absolutely not disappointed to see no sign of Richie at the front of the store, which probably meant he was taking phone orders in the back. And he was absolutely not

tempted to phone in just to hear his friend's voice. It's not like he had a crush or anything.

When he got to the pharmacy, Eddie spotted a familiar redhead at the back counter.

"Hey, Bev," he said as he approached her from behind.

"Hey, Shortstack," she grinned, running a hand through his hair with a ruffle. Eddie swatted her hand away.

"Oh my god, you've been spending too much time with Richie, Beverly. Don't make me hate you, too," he threatened, but couldn't help the smirk that started to form on his lips.

Bev scoffed. "Nonsense, you could never hate me. Or Richie for that matter." She side-eyed him, raising her eyebrows like she knew something he didn't.

Eddie was about to ask her what the fuck that was supposed to mean, when the pharmacist came over and handed her a box of medication.

"There you go, Miss Marsh. Ah, Mr Kaspbrak! Haven't seen you in a while."

Eddie painted on a smile as he spoke to the pharmacist, ignoring Bev's amused glances from where she stood off to the side. Once he had the bottles for his mother, the two of them paid for their things and left the drugstore.

"Got any plans for the rest of the day?" Bev asked him and Eddie shook his head immediately. He rolled his eyes internally, feeling a little pathetic for doing absolutely nothing when Richie wasn't around. He knew he could just as easily call Bill or Mike and go watch a movie or check out whatever new comics were at the bookstore or literally anything except what he had been doing the past two and a half weeks, which was fuck all.

Okay, he'd gone to the movies to see Alien 3 with Bill, Richie and Stan like he said (and, contrary to what Richie had said that day in the hammock, Eddie did not scream or cry or cover his eyes – he simply gagged every time a face-hugger jumped at someone). After

the film, Richie and Stan had left immediately when Richie told them he wanted to get a job, because Stan was the smartest of them all and wanted to help Richie write his resume. Eddie stayed, happy to hang out with Bill, and it was *nice* to be calm and chat about the movie without fucking Richie cracking jokes and poking his side every five seconds. He should probably call Bill and organise another time to hang out, because Eddie always enjoyed spending time with his oldest friend, even if they didn't do it that much. It was pretty much the only time Eddie could sit in silence and be comfortable, because being around his mother was agitating and being around Richie was equal parts infuriating and exciting. Bill was sweet and relaxing to be around. Eddie definitely needed to spend more one-on-one time with him, or maybe just with any of his friends without the loud mouthed boy with glasses.

Beverly glanced at him curiously, probably at his silence, but if she wondered anything, she didn't say. "Ben asked me to come hang out with him and Stan at the library later, if you wanted to come?" she offered. "I know it's not the most thrilling way to spend an afternoon, but it'd sure beat whatever it is you do at home by yourself. Better than moping around, pining over Richie."

Eddie whipped around to face her. "I am *not* pining."

She held up her hands in defence, but the smirk on her lips betrayed her. "Whatever you say, kiddo. The offer still stands, anyhow."

Eddie did roll his eyes this time.

They did end up at the library. Eddie and Bev parted ways to return to their respective houses, drop off their pharmacy purchases and grab their bikes. Stan and Ben were already there, sitting next to each other at a large table, both engrossed in books, and neither looked up when Beverly and Eddie sat down across from them. Eddie's eyes darted over the book covers; Ben was reading a nonfiction book about the First World War, and Stan, surprise surprise, was reading *A Guide to Australian Birds*. What nerds.

When Bev pulled a magazine off the nearest shelf and propped her feet up on the edge of the table, Eddie decided to check the brand new digital library catalogue for books on New York. He recalled

Richie once mentioning something about drama or theatre or something performing related, and Eddie had heard good things about the academia at NYU, so it seemed like a good place for them to consider moving to in a few years. Eddie's heart thumped loudly in his ears at the thought of what they planned to do, still not fully believing it was possible. Eventually he found a couple of guides and books about colleges and things to do, then he sat back down across from Stan to read.

Ben and Beverly had scooted over to chat quietly about Bev's magazine, but Stan still didn't acknowledge his friends' presence, which, while seemed pretty typical for Stan, especially when he was engrossed in a book, but it still made Eddie feel the tiniest bit annoyed. He was a sucker for attention, what could he say? Richie would have spoken to him if he were there instead of Stan.

He made a few mental notes about New York City: Queens seemed like a decent neighbourhood, the last few years had seen a rather dramatic economic downfall but things were starting to get better again, but not so much better that it would be unaffordable for them. Maybe. He'd definitely want to talk to Richie about this sooner rather than later. They needed to start considering their options if they were really going to do this. Fuck, were they really going to do this? Were they really going to up and leave all their friends without a word? Eddie had no qualms leaving his mother, and he was sure Richie felt the same about his own parents, but their *friends*?

Eddie peered over the top of his book and looked at Stan. His hair was curlier than Richie's, softer and cleaner, too – at least *someone* else in their group had decent hygiene practices. His eyes moved slowly over the pages, as if he were savouring every word he read about these animals he loved so much. Eddie tilted his head to look at Bev and Ben, now sitting at the end of the table, squished into each other's sides as they gushed over something funny in the magazine, and Eddie's heart ached at the thought of leaving them all behind with no explanation. Maybe he should also talk to Richie about telling them, if not straight away, then right before they leave. He wasn't sure if Richie could be trusted to keep such a big secret for literal years. Eddie just wanted to say goodbye, because who knew how long it'd be before they all saw each other again.

He would have to check these books out of the library so Richie could have a read through as well. Richie didn't seem to have any sort of plan when he'd sprung the idea on Eddie initially, so it was as good a starting point as any. It was Thursday, Eddie suddenly remembered, heart fluttering at the thought of *finally* getting to see his best friend again. Four days was a long time.

Richie clocked out and all but ran out the back of the pizza store to grab his bike, hurrying home like his life depended on it. It was after 8pm, so his father would shortly be returning home as well, his mother would have already retired to her room, and Richie needed to pack an overnight bag with extra snacks and fuck off out of there before Wentworth arrived. His parents may not have paid any attention to where he was and what he was doing, but if they actually saw him sneaking out, it'd be a whole different story.

It had been nearly five days since he'd seen his friends and Richie was this close to losing his mind. Every week on Thursday nights for probably the past six months, he'd go over to Eddie's after their parents went to bed, climbed up to the second floor window and showered his friend with affection and fun. Today he was bringing another Richie Tozier speciality – food, food, food. Sonia Kaspbrak was like a fucking prison guard when it came to her food sometimes, and Eddie was a massive sweet tooth, had mentioned something about craving chocolate last weekend at the group's sleepover at Bill's place, and boy, did Richie have the fix for him.

He dismounted his bike when he got home, discarded it on the front lawn and reached for the door handle, knowing it would be unlocked because fuck knows his mother wasn't a responsible adult. He took the stairs two at a time, the soles of his feet screeching at him after standing around for six hours already today, but he ignored it, grabbing his backpack and emptying the contents of the main pocket onto his bedroom floor; it blended right in with the other mess lying around. He bounded back downstairs and opened the cupboard, scooping everything into his bag, zipped it up and hiked it over his shoulder, walking right back out the door that was still wide open. Richie was back on his bike barely two minutes after getting home, and would be at Eddie's in another eight, his thighs aching from

pedalling so quickly.

The other week, when Richie asked Eddie to run away with him, it was honestly a shot in the dark that he'd had little to no hope of coming to fruition. Part of him felt like it was just another one of his stupid ideas that people scoffed or laughed at, and part of him figured Eddie would do exactly that. Only a very small, hidden, secret, locked away part actually believed it was a plan they could make happen. He still didn't really believe it was a plan they could make happen. He had a difficult time keeping his mouth shut as it was, although anything that came out was most often of little substance anyway, so it wasn't like anyone would take him seriously if he said he was going to run away with Eddie.

Richie huffed out a laugh. Running away with Eddie. It was fucking insane.

Richie had learned over the years that his feelings towards each of the members of the Loser's Club were vastly different. There was Bill, who he looked up to and used to worship, who was growing into the young man Richie always hoped *he* would be, who he would follow anywhere, who he followed into Neibolt without thinking twice because it was Bill and Richie trusted Bill more than any other person on the planet.

Then there was Stan and Beverly, who Richie might say were his best friends, in a way, because he loved them so fiercely and so deeply and would probably kill for them. He'd known Stan since kindergarten, they'd grown up together, grown into young men together. Richie had been there, arm around Stan while he cried after his Bar Mitzvah, sitting on the step outside the back of the synagogue, heads resting together. Stan had been the first person Richie told when his father started cheating on his mother, because Stan had been there when his parents were still in love and he had seen their relationship fall apart and he had seen the toll it took on Richie. Sometimes Richie wasn't sure that Stan still treasured their friendship as much as he did, because he always told him he hated him and never laughed at his jokes or Voices and always had something negative to say about the movies and music Richie chose. Richie felt like they hadn't been as close recently either, like they didn't hang out one-on-one anymore and their phone calls were few

and far between, and Richie kind of missed the dry humoured bastard who deadpanned like a motherfucker. But then there were moments when Stan would crack, he'd smirk or even bark out a laugh and look at Richie fondly, and Richie's grin would take over his entire face because *Stan The Man thought he was funny*. It was the best fucking feeling.

Although he may not have known Beverly for as long as some of the others, Richie did know that they would be friends for the rest of their lives. They both knew what shitty parents were like, they both wanted to get the fuck away from their families as soon as they could, and when Bev took her life back, when her aunt moved from Portland to Derry for her, she'd sobbed in Richie's arms because she was finally free from her father. Bev gave Richie his first cigarette and his first joint, and it became a weekly thing they did during the school year – under the bleachers, of course, because they were predictable like that. With a cigarette between their fingers and smoke surrounding their heads and not another person in sight, Richie and Bev were safe to talk about anything. Sometimes, when they were high, they'd lie down on the grass perpendicular to each other, her head on his stomach, passing a joint back and forth, discussing normal things like Joan Jett and David Bowie and Indiana Jones and The Breakfast Club, and weird fucking things like parallel universe theories and how long it would realistically take to swim to Europe and what would happen to the world if all adults suddenly disappeared. One time Richie brought a tennis ball and was throwing it up in the air and catching it, joint between his teeth as they chatted about music, and Bev snatched the ball away, started doing the same thing above her own head. Richie had huffed, taken another drag, and then the ball hit a beam and rebounded into his face, smashing his glasses, and then hitting Bev's nose before bounding away. Richie had pulled the broken glasses off his face with a groan, eyes narrowed at Beverly and told her that *this is why we are the timeline that God abandoned* and they had laughed so hard that they cried and their sides ached and they completely forgot about their half-baked plans to see Bon Jovi next time they toured. Beverly was the best friend that he always found himself laughing around, and god knew they all needed a good laugh sometimes.

Ben and Mike were also relatively new to the Losers' Club and Richie

sort of felt bad that he didn't talk to them more. Over the last three years, Ben had grown close with Bev and Bill, and Mike had been spending time with Stan and Bill (because of course, every single person that knew Bill, loved him). Sure, sometimes the members of their group tended to split off and hang out with one or two other people, but the moments with all seven of them doubled over laughing after coming out of the Aladdin, or crowded around Richie or Bill at the arcade, cheering each other on to break their high scores, or bickering over which Queen song had the best guitar solo in the clubhouse – these moments were what warmed their hearts. And sure, sometimes it was just Ben and Bev, Bill and Stan and Mike, Richie and Eddie, but they always made sure to keep up the weekly gatherings, be it movie nights at Bill's or trips to the mall to have lunch together or water fights in the quarry.

The Aladdin was probably Richie's third favourite place in the world, only to Eddie's room and the arcade. Their gang always took up the back row of the theatre, but no matter who was sitting where, Richie was always banished to the end of the line because he talked so much, and Eddie was always beside him. Somehow, Richie's legs seemed to end up on top of Eddie most of the time, but neither of them ever mentioned it, even when Eddie's fingers brushed Richie's calf or played with his shoelaces. It was probably just because they were so used to doing that in the hammock down at the clubhouse. Probably just familiar and nice and especially during a horror movie, Richie knew Eddie needed comfort so he was just comforting his friend and his friend was simply allowing himself to be comforted, right? Right.

Except Richie knew that was such bullshit.

He was in love with his best friend and he had been for years and he'd finally admitted it to himself during the whole clown fiasco when Eddie nearly died and then promptly squashed it down with the rest of his ridiculous feelings for cute boys and focused only on the ones for cute girls because he didn't need anyone else knowing what a freak he was.

He pulled up to the Kaspbrak residence, not wanting to think about that old crush, that totally old and non-existent anymore crush, when he was about to see and hang out with and probably sleep next to

said ex-crush in a few minutes. He stashed his bike in a bush that now had a bike-shaped indent, grabbing some small rocks from the garden and tossing them up into Eddie's window.

It took three rocks before his friend's face appeared, smile wide already. Richie grinned back, chest growing tight and warm at the sight of him. Ignoring the burn in his legs from all the strain he'd put on them this week, Richie scaled the tree as if it were second nature – which it kind of was, at this point, after so many years of doing it – feet instinctively finding the grooves and bumps in the trunk until he could reach the window sill. He swung a leg over and squeezed through the ever tight space, toppled into the room, glasses falling off his face – he really should have expected them to do that by now.

“For fuck's sake,” he mumbled, reaching out to find them.

“Here, dumbass,” came Eddie's voice somewhere to his left. Richie turned his head, seeing an Eddie-shaped blob kneel down close to him, and then his glasses were back on his face, if not slightly skewed. He reached up to adjust them, locking eyes with Eddie, who was also kneeling on the floor.

“Thanks,” he said weakly, swallowed, then surged forward and threw his arms around his small friend. “I missed your stupid face, Eddie Spaghetti.” Richie's body relaxed when Eddie's arms snaked around his back, squeezing back just as tight. He smiled into Eddie's shoulder, resisting the urge to inhale deeply and fucking *smell* his friend.

They settled on the bed, Eddie against the headboard and Richie cross-legged on the other end, digging through his backpack and throwing sweets at Eddie, when he noticed what was laid out on the bed. He grabbed an open book lying in front of Eddie.

“The fuck is this?”

“It's a book, jackass.”

Richie resisted the urge to roll his eyes, slipping into one of his Voices easily. It was supposed to be his Southern Belle, but judging by the displeased and mildly amused look on Eddie's face, it wasn't

quite hitting the mark tonight. "Oh, my, however can it be? A book, in this good Christian village? Lord help us all now that Eds Spagheds has sinned." Richie peered at the front cover, dropping the act. "New York?"

Eddie shrugged, eyes dropping to where his hands were fidgeting with a candy wrapper. "Yeah, I thought we could look at going there when we, you know..." He trailed off, still not looking at Richie. "I was doing research on colleges and stuff today."

Richie's chest swelled with affection for his best friend, lips curving into a wide grin. "You're so fucking cute, Eds. But why are you being all nervous and shit? It was a barely conceived plan when I asked you and you've somehow already put in more effort than me."

Eddie shrugged again, sneaking a glance at Richie this time, voice much softer when he spoke again. "I dunno, I just... Kind of feel like there isn't much I can do to help, you know? My mom would sooner smother me in my sleep than let me work in a filthy, greasy kitchen like you or whatever, so I can't really contribute financially, and it sucks. I thought research was something I could do so I went with some of the others to the library and New York seemed like a viable place. Good schools, a shit ton nicer than the people in Derry." He picked up a chocolate bar, the crinkle of the wrapper almost echoing in the room for how quiet the two boys were being. "Queens seems like one of the safer neighbourhoods," he added, taking a bite of chocolate.

Toeing his shoes off, Richie's face softened into a gentle smile, thinking about Eddie and probably Ben in the library today, noses in books for hours. They were really doing this, and New York sounded as good a place as any to Richie; as long as Eddie was safe and happy, then he was happy. Tucking his legs under himself to sit on his knees, Richie picked up another book from the small pile on Eddie's nightstand and opened it to a random page. He shifted across the bed until he was sitting next to Eddie, snatching the candy from his friend's fingers and popping it in his own mouth, much to Eddie's protest. Richie passed Eddie the other book and grabbed another handful of candy from his bag, dropping it between them where the sides of their legs touched. He bumped Eddie's shoulder gently, shot him a smirk, both of them holding an open book.

“C’mon. Let’s hop in and get researching.”

3. Rich The Bitch

Summary for the Chapter:

July 1992. Eddie breaks rules for Richie. Richie confides in Stan.

Eddie could hardly believe himself sometimes.

Here he was, downstairs at nearly midnight, sifting through his mother's purse for small change that she wouldn't notice going missing.

For fucking Richie, of course.

Since he started his job at Domino's, Richie had been saving three-quarters of his paycheck for his and Eddie's getaway, with most of the remainder used for buying food since the Toziers never kept the fridge or pantry stocked with anything substantial, which Eddie thought was preposterous. Eddie always snuck food into his bedroom on Thursday nights to make sure Richie was getting a somewhat balanced diet, and the one thing Richie's house always seemed to have was snack food because Maggie Tozier liked to eat chocolate when she was drunk (seriously, who married a dentist and then practically lived off candy bars?), so Eddie knew he had kind of been eating properly. What he hadn't accounted for was his unsavoury habit of smoking.

Eddie didn't even know when Richie took up smoking, he just remembered seeing him and Beverly under the bleachers at school one time in freshman year, passing a cigarette back and forth between them, Bev's head thrown back, laughing at something Richie was saying. Empty cigarette packets became one of those things that Eddie always found on Richie's floor or desk, along with candy wrappers and plastic forks and scrunched up paper and unwashed clothes. But now, because of how diligently he was saving his money – which warmed Eddie's heart to think about, Richie being responsible for him, for them – cigarettes had become something of a luxury.

Beverly had been stealing cigarettes for as long as they'd known her, and had recently started giving Richie a few from each pack, apparently not asking why he couldn't just acquire his own, since the workers at the pharmacy didn't give two shits about checking their age and it clearly wasn't that difficult to swipe them. And although Eddie despised the fact that Richie smoked, he hated withdrawal-Richie even more. Withdrawal-Richie was somehow more restless and irritable than normal. Richie had tried giving up smoking completely about a year ago, but with all his mood swings, his newfound ability to get snappy over everything and yell at the drop of a hat, Eddie had honestly come very close to murdering him – he and Stan planned to smother him at a sleepover and drop his body in the Denbrough swimming pool to make it look like an accidental drowning. Withdrawal-Richie was more tired, more hungry and more annoying, and Eddie couldn't stand to be around his best friend when he was like that.

So if Richie had barely any money to buy things he actually wanted, like cigarettes or movie tickets or a new t-shirt, and his deadbeat parents weren't going to do anything about it, then Eddie supposed he had to step up and buy stuff for him. Which is how he found himself at 11:48pm going through his mother's handbag.

He found a few dollar notes and some coins, scooping the cash up and depositing it into his fanny pack on the table, moving slowly to not let the coins clink against each other. If he came back a few nights later and snatched up some more, it'd be more than enough for Richie to buy himself some cigarettes.

Eddie was somewhat pleased with himself, if he were being honest.

Later in the week found Eddie at the pizza place, where he'd taken to hanging out lately since it was effectively the only time was he would get to see Richie if it wasn't a Thursday. He *had* only been there yesterday and Richie *had* crawled into his room last night, as per usual Thursday, but Eddie's mother had recently increased his allowance because of the one time she heard his stomach growling when he came home from the quarry, said something about being a growing boy and the extra cash was strictly to get himself fruit salad or some healthy shit when he was out with his friends. Of course, what Mrs Kaspbrak didn't know wouldn't hurt her, so Eddie had been

finding himself at Domino's a few times a week, ordering garlic bread or a milkshake if he were alone, or on the odd occasion Bill and Stan would come with him, they'd get pizza and sodas to share.

The first time Eddie came into the restaurant, Richie nearly squealed, threw his dumb, red work hat in the air like a graduation cap. They hadn't seen each other for three days at that point, and although Eddie had been spending more and more time with Ben, Mike and Stan in the library, reading and chatting and learning, he missed the *fun* of being around Richie, even if it was just comments in passing while he waited other people's tables. That first time, Eddie had ordered a vanilla milkshake and sat by the window, alternating between watching people go about their lives outside and observing Richie at the front counter. He had greeted every customer with a grin, quickly jotting down their order and letting them know how long they'd need to wait. Eddie hadn't been able to help the soft smile that graced his face, watching his best friend work his ass off. Even if their getaway was not the underlying reason Richie had gotten a job in the first place, Eddie would have been proud of him for being mature enough to hold down a part-time job for more than a week. Although, it ticked Stan off to no end knowing that Richie was capable of being mature, but never behaved as such around the Losers.

Today, Eddie was seated in his usual spot by the window, slice of garlic pizza in one hand, novel in the other. He and Ben had talked about what they were going to be studying in English next semester and Eddie figured that if he ever had a chance of getting a scholarship somewhere after senior year, he'd better start implementing good study habits now. In his fanny pack was an envelope filled with a little note he'd written and four dollars of stolen spare change – a gift for Richie for working at the pizza place for a whole month. It'd be enough to get him a pack of cigarettes and perhaps he could use the rest to go towards a new comic book or something; Eddie had noticed Richie was reading the same one the last two times the Losers hung out and Richie was not a slow reader by any means. He was way too fucking smart, actually, considering how little effort he put into literally anything to do with school or learning. And on the other hand, here Eddie was, during fucking summer, struggling to read this stupid tragedy about a dumbass

prince and his dumbass murdering family, while Richie could probably read the whole damn book in one night, Shakespearian language be damned.

Eddie had been at it for close to an hour when Richie finally came over to him.

“Good day, Spaghetti Man! ‘Tis a pleasure, as always, to see yer face.” Apparently he was back at it with the Irish Guy. “Wotcha got there, aye?” He snatched the book from Eddie and inspected it, nose scrunching in disgust as he read the front cover, dropping the Voice immediately. “What the fuck, Eds? Have you been infected by whatever disorder Stan has that’s got you reading this bullshit? *Voluntarily?*” His already large eyes widened, mouth slightly agape as he gawked at Eddie.

Eddie snatched his book back. “It’s not a fucking disorder, you idiot. It’s called studying, and yes, I’m pre-reading for school because, in case you weren’t aware, some of us have to actually try hard in school to get As and Bs,” he spat, although he was sure Richie could tell there wasn’t any venom behind his words; it was all for show, it always was.

“Right, right,” Richie nodded, brows furrowing together with fake deep thought as he brought a hand to his chest. “Yer absolutely correct, Eddie me love, an’ I am deeply sorry tha’ my natural smarts offend yer tiny brain so much. It’s just another reason why ya mum loves me.” He smirked, picking up Eddie’s empty small pizza box and walking back to the kitchen, glancing over his shoulder to see Eddie’s extremely unamused glare at the back of his head. “See ya t’morrow at Billy’s, Eds!”

Honestly, he was *insufferable* sometimes.

Bookmarking his page, Eddie then withdrew the envelope from his fanny pack and placed it on the table along with a tip, not waiting for Richie to emerge from the back of the store to leave. He’d left little notes and other shit along with his tip before, and Richie never really mentioned it afterwards, but he did see him wearing the stupid friendship bracelet Eddie made one time a few weeks ago, so Eddie knew he was getting the little gifts. Still, as he closed the shop door

behind him, Eddie turned around and looked back through the window to see Richie back at his table, inspecting the handwritten note with a big, dumb grin on his face. That was confirmation enough for Eddie to know he'd done a good job, so he left, the grin forming on his own face just as big and just as dumb.

True to form, the Losers had organised yet another sleepover at Bill's house that weekend. It was becoming something of a tradition, actually. Nearly every weekend that summer so far had found the seven of them strewn across the Denbrough living room, some huddled together on the couch, some on the floor, and then Stan in the armchair, because no one wanted to listen to him complain about a sore back or sweaty neck for the whole night if they made him sit anywhere else. This time, however, Beverly had come through with the good shit, bringing a bottle of vodka for them to share. Richie wasn't sure who had decided on the Back To The Future marathon, because when he had arrived after his shift finished at 8pm, they had already been putting the first film on. Not that he minded at all – Lea Thompson was hot as fuck. And Michael J. Fox, if he were being honest, but he would deny that into his grave if asked.

“Nice of you to show up, Trashmouth,” Stan quipped when Richie hollered from the door upon entering.

“I think you mean ‘grace y’all with my presence’. You should be thanking the stars that I deemed you worthy of my time at all, you lucky bastards,” he shot right back, winking at Stan. Richie saw Mike, Bill and Eddie on the couch together and, as if it weren't still a reasonably warm night, squeezed himself between Bill and Eddie, much to both of their irritation.

“How do you have such little respect for anyone else's personal space?” Stan asked, rolling his eyes as Richie and Eddie started poking each other.

“Yeah, fuck off, Richie,” Eddie added, and Richie clutched at his chest, feigning heartbreak as Eddie's fingers tickled at his side.

“Eds! You betray me! Hide not thy poison with such sweet words! Don't lay thy fucking hands on me because thy touch is a serpent's

sting!”

Ben turned around to look up at them from the floor. “Did you just incorrectly quote Shakespeare?”

Stan snorted. “Who knew Richie had even seen a book before. I am genuinely surprised he hasn’t flunked out of school yet.”

“Aaaand, Stanley Uris, lady and gentlemen, is single and available. Hard to imagine, isn’t it?”

Stan threw his shoe at him.

They had already gone through most of the bottle by the time the credits rolled. Bill got up from his spot on the couch next to Richie, nearly tripped over Mike’s legs that were stretched out from where he sat on Bill’s other side at the right end of the couch, and plopped himself in front of the television to put in the second movie.

“Anyone want mmmore popcorn?” he asked.

“Fuck yeah,” Richie piped up at the same time Ben said “Yes please,” from his seat on the floor next to Bev. Seeing Bill’s alcohol-induced struggle to open the VHS tape, Mike got up, volunteering himself to make some more.

“Thanks, Mike,” Bev said, shooting him a smile as he left the room.

Richie turned to Eddie, who was tucked into his left side against the side of the couch with a thin blanket around him. “How ya doin’, Eds? Ready to pass out from alcohol poisoning yet?” he teased, knowing fully well how much Eddie hated being such a lightweight.

He pouted. “No! I’ve only had like four or five sips. And stop calling me that, you know I hate it.”

Richie snorted, lifting his arms up to drape them across the back of the couch and around Eddie’s shoulders. “Sure thing, Eds.” He ruffled his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp until Eddie swatted his hand away.

The TV screen sprung back to life and Mike walked back into the

room, two large bowls of fresh popcorn in hand. He passed one to Ben and Bev on the floor and another to Bill, who had just stood up to join them on the couch again.

About half an hour into the movie, after the rest of the alcohol had been consumed, Richie noticed Bill nodding off when, more than once, he leaned into Richie's side, head dropping against his shoulder for a second before he abruptly sat up again.

"S'rry, R-R-Rich," he mumbled, words slurring from some combination of tiredness and alcohol. Bill shifted away from him then, instead choosing to lean against Mike, who Richie noticed was also asleep. He glanced down to the floor and saw Bev's mop of vibrant hair against Ben's shoulders and smirked, knowing the boy was probably freaking out about her being so close. Richie's eyes then darted across to Eddie, who was kind of awake, but judging by the glazed look he had in his eyes, wasn't far from falling asleep either. Stan had nodded off almost as soon as the second film had started, even though Richie was pretty sure even Eddie had drunk more vodka than Stan.

"Jesus," Richie said, shaking his head at how pathetic his friends were sometimes. "You guys all asleep already?"

"I'm awake." Ben's hushed voice came from near Richie's feet. "Beverly's out cold, though."

Bill mumbled something incoherent, snuggling into Richie and Mike even more.

Turning his head to the side, Richie whispered into Eddie's ear. "Did you know that boss guy is the Red Hot Chili Peppers' bass player? Cool, right? You know, if I had a DeLorean, I'd only drive it from *time to time*." He paused when Eddie snorted, which was a success in Richie's book. "And to go back to when your mom was young and hot, you know, in the 1800s—"

"Shut up, Richie," Eddie mumbled, but Richie could hear the smile in his voice and glancing down at his sleepy friend confirmed his thoughts.

"You fucking *live* for my commentary, don't deny it. You could never resist the Tozier charm. And it must run in your family, because—ghhh."

Eddie slapped his hand over Richie's mouth, shaking his head. "Nope, that's two mom jokes in less than a minute. I'm going to sleep." He turned away from Richie, dropping his hand to tuck his arms into his chest, his back against Richie's side.

Richie waited a moment before continuing. "Although, no one runs in your family," he hissed in Eddie's ear.

Eddie smacked him, but he kind of deserved it.

Despite Richie's *hilarious* running commentary, Eddie did manage to fall asleep by the time the film ended. Ben was still up, yawning as he switched the tapes and started the third movie, turning the volume down a little more. Richie tried to shuffle Eddie around to get them both more comfortable, leaning his back against Bill's side and pulling Eddie's back against his chest. He yanked the blanket as it slid off Eddie, draping it over his shoulders and under his chin. Only a few minutes after the opening credits, Richie heard Ben's snoring, and chuckled quietly to himself.

Last man standing, as per usual.

Richie was absentmindedly running his fingers through Eddie's hair over and over. It had started to grow out a little longer, get a little curlier and wilder – nowhere in Richie's league, though – and Richie sort of liked it. Made Eddie seem less put together and he wasn't sure why that made him cuter but somehow it did. He hummed, content, rested his cheek against the top of Eddie's head, eyes starting to droop after the McFly-Tannen faceoff scene, wondering what fake name he would choose if he went back in time and gunned down a crazy cowboy.

He was pulled from his imagination when he heard a whimper to his left, and then another, louder and more scared this time. Eyes shooting open, he looked down at Eddie, who hadn't moved, and then up to Stan, whose brows were furrowed together, lip quivering slightly. Richie opened his mouth to say something when Stan jolted

upright with a shout, knocking his blanket to the floor. He whipped around in the dark room only illuminated by the glow of the TV, red cheeks tear-stained as he locked eyes with Richie, chest heaving.

“Don’t!” His leg kicked out from underneath him, seemingly involuntarily, face falling into his hands, mumbling through choked sobs. “D-Don’t leave, you lef—you left me! Why would you lea—”

“Stanley.” Richie’s voice cut through his friend’s distraught rambling, sat up as much as he could with Eddie half on top of him, and placed a hand on the armchair. He’d learned, after being with Eddie through so many panic attacks over the years, what to do in a situation such as this, and those instincts took over. “Stan, you’re okay. It’s Saturday, July 25th 1992. You’re in Bill Denbrough’s house, watching Back To The Future Three with me, your friend, Richie Tozier. You’re okay and you’re safe, okay? Copy my breathing.” Richie inhaled and exhaled slowly, kept his eyes on Stan until his breathing calmed down, returning to a normal pace.

Stan’s eyes slid shut for a few seconds and Richie wondered if he were going to just go back to sleep, when he opened his eyes again and looked at Richie fondly, placing his hand on top of Richie’s on the arm of his seat.

“Thanks, Rich,” Stan mumbled, dropping his gaze and then his hand.

“Not a problemo, Stan The Man. I’ve gotten used to dealing with this dickhead flipping out on me from time to time.” He gestured at Eddie in his lap, his voice gentler when he spoke again, “You are okay, though, right?”

Richie was kind of aware that Stan still had nightmares sometimes. Not many of them had one-on-one sleepovers anymore, but Bill and Stan occasionally stayed at each other’s houses since their families got along so well, and Bill had confided in Richie – who the fuck knew why – because he was so worried about their friend not being able to sleep through the night two whole years after they’d killed that wretched clown.

Stan was still for a few moments, as if contemplating how to respond to Richie’s question. He nodded slowly, eyes downcast, and

whispered, "Yeah."

Richie glanced around the room, a little surprised that no one else had woken up with Stan's shouting, but thought better than to mention it; Stan was always the most put together in their group and probably wouldn't take kindly to Richie outing him as a softy or scaredy cat or whatever.

"Bill worries about you," he settled on saying. He watched the TV screen, not really paying attention to the movie anymore, but also not wanting to maintain eye contact with Stan lest he brush it all off and return into his highly-put-together shell, or pretend this whole situation never happened. It was strangely comforting to know that Richie wasn't the only one slightly adverse to emotional interactions.

"I know," Stan replied, still whispering.

Richie dropped his own voice to match. "I think we all still have nightmares sometimes." He tried to come off as empathising and comforting rather than pitying, but he didn't know how well he achieved that. Richie sucked at emotions sometimes.

"I know."

"And it doesn't make you weak or stupid or anything."

"I know."

Richie paused. One side of his mouth curved upwards slightly. "Well, aren't you just a regular Einstein, Staniel?"

Stan huffed out something that resembled a laugh and smiled. Richie's chest warmed.

"I suppose I am," Stan said.

Their attention returned to the movie, but Richie was sure neither of them were actually taking in what they were watching. His fingers were still tangled in Eddie's hair, caressing gently, and after a few minutes of blankly staring at the television, he felt Stan's eyes boring into the side of his face. Richie snuck a glance at his friend and caught him looking.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Dude, come on, what is it?”

Stan shook his head, smiling again. He was still staring at Richie and it was almost starting to make him feel a little self-conscious. Then Stan’s gaze dropped from Richie’s eyes to his hand – the one in Eddie’s hair. Richie stopped moving, definitely self-conscious now. He swallowed. He couldn’t know for sure what Stan was trying to convey to him by looking at his hand in Eddie’s hair, but the lurch that his stomach gave initially had subsided when they made eye contact again, and Stan was still smiling softly.

And apparently his fear was written all over his face.

“It’s okay, Richie,” Stan said, nodding to gesture at Richie’s hand in Eddie’s hair. “You’re okay.”

Richie’s jaw tightened, his lips parted, his sharp intake of breath loud in the room because the TV had become nothing but white noise when Richie and Stan were having a moment like this.

Stan was still looking at him fondly.

Stan said it was okay.

Stan said *he* was okay.

Richie blinked, eyes starting their tell-tale burn when tears were on the way. His brows furrowed together and Stan was still smiling at him. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen a gentler expression on his friend’s face. Stan opened his mouth slightly, then closed it. He pursed his lips, but didn’t really look like he was uncomfortable, just a little unsure, perhaps.

“Are you... Do you...”

He let his words hang in their air between them, didn’t finish the sentence, but he didn’t need to; Richie understood. He looked down at Eddie, eyes dancing over his sleeping friend’s face, drinking in his

relaxed features, gentle with sleep. When he finally looked back up at Stan, he nodded twice, slowly, and Stan's soft smile twitched, grew a little wider, and Richie's heart swelled a little more.

"I know," Stan said.

Richie huffed out a short, disbelieving laugh-scoff. "How?" he asked.

It was a little concerning that Stan figured it out, because Richie thought he'd been doing a splendid job of hiding his ridiculous feelings, but apparently not. What if someone else had figured it out, someone who wasn't as kind as Stan? Richie's body ran cold, his breathing picking up slightly. He used to get teased and bullied in middle school for this exact reason, but he was sure that most people thought it was just another random rumour that Bowers started to harass the weird kids, not knowing that everything they said was completely and entirely true.

"Mostly it's the way you treat him," Stan replied with a slight shrug. "It's just that little bit different from everyone else."

Richie's eyes darted anxiously around the room at their friends.

Stan quickly shook his head. "None of them know, I don't think. I mean, we all know you worship the ground Eddie walks on—" Richie rolled his eyes "—but I think they just think it's because he's your best friend."

"Which he is. The rest of you suck balls."

"Yeah, but *I* could always tell it was more than that."

Richie's brow creased. "Always?"

"At least the past couple of years. You pick on him so damn much, it was impossible to not notice. For me. I've known you your whole life, Tozier, don't think I can't tell when you have a crush."

At that, Richie smiled, dropping his chin as he felt his cheeks flush. Stan reached over with his palm up and Richie slipped his hand into his and squeezed.

“Thanks, Stan,” he whispered.

“Not a problemo... Rich The Bitch.”

Richie laughed and a tear slipped down his cheek. It was so fucking good to have a friend like Stan.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm not entirely happy with this chapter tbh, particularly Eddie's part, but whatever. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated! :))